

Who is watching your back?

The day was not much different from any other day when you are in a combat zone. The weekend passes as do all the other days of the week. The only time the day is much different is when your days are growing short before you leave Vietnam, to either go on R&R or get out of Vietnam for good.

Therefore, when I awoke this day I did not know it would be an unusual day before it ended. I try to sleep as long as the temperature of day will allow me. About 10:30 AM is all the longer I can tolerate the heat while lying in my bed of sweat. Sometimes, one of the hooch maids will accidentally wake me as they remove the laundry bag from my area or sweep the floor. Most of the time, the maids are very quiet as they go about their chores.

The time between when I get up and when I get my weapon and equipment ready for the nighttime activity is usually mine to spend as I want. I can eat lunch (I sleep through breakfast most of the time). I am not a big fan of eating the powdered eggs the army supplies us for that meal anyway. I might catch a ride to the PX and another one back. We have trucks for the patrol, but they were not for driving on personal matters. Most of the time, if you needed to go either somewhere, you walked, or if where you needed to go were not close you would hitchhike.

I will never forget the time someone picked me up in an air-conditioned car; I was ready to ride with that person anywhere he was going.

Between walking in the heat and trying to sleep in the heat, I weighed 145 pounds when I left country two and one half years after I arrived. I was all lean and mean.

Oh, I was going to tell you about how unusual my day was. Everything was normal until I walked into the Tactical Operational Command (TOC) to see where all the other patrols would be for the night. I walked over to the large map on the wall that revealed the entire

firebase of Phu Loi and a large portion of the surrounding areas. This map has an overlay of heavy flexible clear plastic. The map is overlaid with a clear thick sheet of plastic so it can be written on. All the ambush positions for the night are plotted on this plastic. This way the people at the TOC can keep track of all the ground actives outside the base perimeter. At least that was all I was interested in before our patrol was to venture in this no man's land for the next eight to ten hours.

I asked if all the friendly ambush positions were plotted. (Friendly) meaning other patrols that was in the areas that are our allies. The answer I would always hear is, "they're all on the board." I would give the map another look to see if our patrol was clear to proceed to our designated ambush site and if there were any areas we would want to avoid.

If our route or routes were clear to travel, I would leave to join the other members of the team outside and we would leave. Many times, I would say to the men in the command center, "keep us safe out there, and we will help keep you safe in here."

Tonight was different; the answer was not as usual. The Major told me, "We are still waiting for two more patrols to call in." The night was nasty, and I figured they would call in soon and say they were not going out. I said, that I would check back again once we were on our way.

As I stepped out of this bright air-conditioned blockhouse and into the muggy hot night air, I felt a gnawing feeling began to eat away at me. All of a sudden, I was more on edge than I usually would be. My mind kept thinking of the two groups not posted on the map.

I tried to dismiss this feeling as I joined the rest of the patrol. Our conversation was light as it always was. We had about a ten-minute walk before we arrived at bunker 26 where we would depart the perimeter through the razor wire and out into darkness beyond the safety of our base. As we walked along, Ken Burley was cracking jokes about his family back home. He had a different kind of humor that seemed to touch everyone. I remember another night much like this one. The rain was beating hard against our faces and the

wind was relentless as it tried to tear away our rain ponchos. We were about to leave the compound when Burley piped up in his Smokey Bear voice and said, "Only you can prevent forest fires". That was more than any of us could handle; we started to chuckle and then broke out in such hard laughter we needed to return to the bunker in order to calm ourselves. What a thing to say on a rain-soaked night before going out to set up an ambush.

Tonight, Burley continued his monolog and the rain felt much the same as the other night. As we approached bunker 26, the more the gnawing within me grew. I radioed the command center as our patrols always do before leaving the wire. The command center alerts the other bunkers in the area of where we are and that we might be moving through their area. They would need to check their fire, until we were either in our ambush position or out of range. Once we were clear, they would return to their normal orders.

At that time, I asked if the other two groups had notified where they were posted. The reply was "negative"! I told them that I would get out away from the wire and we would temporarily set up short until we knew where the others are set up.

On a rain-filled night like this, we would not see one another until we were in a firefight. My reason was to get out of view of the bunker line. Once the team was clear, I would stop the patrol and wait for our command center to give us the clear to continue.

The night was so dark we were having difficulty seeing the man nearest to us. This is always dangerous; if we confront the enemy we would be sitting ducks, and if we lost part of the team in the dark, we might not find the other members of the patrol again until daylight. This happened to a patrol I was on once. It was a dark night and we were in an area about 800 meters out from the perimeter fence. The brush was above our heads and we were about 100 meters from the nearest village. This is a very poor time and place to lose part of a five-man patrol. All that can be done is that the two members that were left had to stay put and wait for the group that left to return. These are some very tense times for everyone

I was one of the two that had been left behind and we had no idea how far the other went before they realized part of the team was missing. We could only hope they could get back without anyone shooting.

Let's get back to our present predicament.

Oh, you want to know the outcome of the night the team became separated? The team members that left us, returned and we continued our mission. A patrol meeting was held the next day to discuss the matter, so it will not happen again.

We were far enough away from the bunkers that I knew they would not see us. I radioed back and told the command center I was going to stop and wait for the other patrols to report their positions, I was 500 meters west of our posted AP (Ambush Position). The five of us just wanted to get to our AP site so we could settle in for our night ambush routine. I know you are thinking routines are not good for ambushes. I will agree somewhat with that idea. Once we were in our position, we all study our surroundings. It is important to know how far away objects such as trees, brush, and paths are from where we are setting. The claymore mines needed to be placed around us; most of them faced to the kill zone.

What we need to do is establish who is going to stand watch first, second and so on. Yes, even in a pouring rain we have become used to resting some and trusting others to be fully alert to our surroundings. If the man on watch has trouble keeping awake, he would waken another or all of us, if necessary.

We waited there for one and one half hours in the blowing wind and pouring rain before they radioed back. They told me not to move as we were heading straight into an ambush. It was about 250 meters away.

We were lucky the weather was so bad. If the night was clear; we would have been spotted and could have had artillery fired on us by the other patrol calling in our position.

The wind and rain continued through the hours of darkness. We were not spotted by the other patrol, and were able to leave our position without being noticed. We did not detect their patrol either. If that situation were to happen, again I would not have gone out that night.

I learned to pay attention to that quiet voice that speaks to me. It is a gnawing feeling that tears at my every fiber. It speaks to my soul, and if I ever have to ignore it, I better be praying.

The man up stairs is watching my back.